

Barry Pettit: A High-flying hero

Tony Pompella of Leading Edges Advertising wrote this story about Barry Pettit, an emergency room nurse at Rush Foundation Hospital and a medical crew director with the Mississippi Air National Guard's 183rd Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron.

Tony and his wife, Sharon, live in Meridian. Sharon is an administrative assistant at Meridian High School and also works with Winstead Realty. The couple has two children, 27-year-old Karie and 26-year-old Tyler.

Here's what Tony said about his story: "It's a tribute to a true patriot, and to Barry's unselfish devotion to his country, his family and his employer."

By Tony Pompella
special to The Star

For those who live in northern California near Travis Air Force Base, a C-130 cargo plane, better known as "Hercules," lumbering down the runway and lazily pushing its huge frame toward the heavens, is a fairly common sight.

Other than a passing thought about how this green, cargo-laden monster manages to defy gravity and lift its wheels above the ground, little attention is paid to its departures.

It is just naturally assumed that these mammoth transports are airlifting another load of supplies to a military installation somewhere. After all, this is Travis AFB, and transporting forces and supplies is a big part of what its people do.

However, the Air Force is making some changes. It is converting some cargo and refueling aircraft, such as the "Hercules," into air ambulances.

This means that the "cargo" flying high above Travis and other Air Force bases across this nation is likely to be wounded military service men and women on the last leg of a long trip home.

Inside an air ambulance

Onboard these air ambulances, attending to wounded troops, are five-man medical teams whose job it is to admin-

ister quality care throughout the duration of these long-awaited flights home.

A medical crew director leads each team, and this is the role filled by Barry Pettit, a young major in the Mississippi Air National Guard from Philadelphia.

Barry's tour of duty as a medical crew director took him away from his family and his career as an emergency room nurse at Rush Foundation Hospital for almost two years.

He received the Air Force Commendation Medal for his outstanding performance in contributing to the successful, first-ever implementation of the Integrated Continental United States Medical Plan in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.

Pettit started his military career by joining the Coast Guard Reserve about 18 years ago. He spent two years in Mobile and Gulfport before transferring to the 183rd Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron, based in Jackson.

On April 7, 2003, Barry and other members of the 183rd were deployed to Andrews Air Force Base for several months and then on to Travis Air Force Base for the duration of their service.

During their nearly two-year tour, he and his crew flew 28 missions in and out of The States for the purpose of, as it reads on his certificate of commendation, "ensuring quality care for our returning warriors."

Barry's surprise

While being called away from home to serve your country is very honorable, it can also be very stressful.

For Barry, like most other service men and women who find themselves in this position, one of his biggest concerns was how leaving would affect his family, friends and career.

"When you are away, you worry about a lot of different things, especially your family and your career back home," Pettit said.

"You hope that everyone

believes in what you are doing and that they support you."

In that respect, Barry Pettit is fortunate. His wife, Amber, had a taste of what military life was like before she and Barry met, and he says this has helped her be more understanding.

"Amber's father and brother are in the Air National Guard in Meridian, so she knows a little something about military life and what to expect," Pettit said. "She has always been very supportive of my military commitment, and I believe she is proud of me for serving my country."

Barry's 10-year-old daughter, Mackie Lauren, is very proud of her dad too.

Of course, this means a lot to Barry, and it also means a great deal that she is even more proud to have him back home. With a little emotion in his voice, Barry recalls the day that he returned.

"Amber and I had decided not to tell Mackie that I was coming home. We wanted it to be a big surprise," he said.

"So, on the day I got home, I went to Mackie's school and eased into the back of her classroom. When she turned and our eyes met, well, I will never forget the look on her face. It was priceless."

Supportive employer

In addition to his friends and family, Barry has also received a lot of support from his employer, Rush Foundation Hospital.

Barry has worked in the Rush emergency room since 1993 and has been a certified Rush Emergency Room nurse since his graduation from Meridian Community College that same year. He says Rush has been very good to him and his family.

"When I got back home, Rush let me pick up right where I left off in the E.R. It was as if I never left. I really appreciate it."

Barry's superior, David Bonner, director of Rush's Emergency Services, says Barry has been an integral part of the emergency room for as

long as he can remember.

"He is an outstanding clinical nurse as well as a great leader," Bonner said.

"I consider Barry as one of my personal and professional heroes. He spent almost two years away from his home and family taking care of America's sons and daughters.

"There is no doubt in my mind that if Barry were called back tomorrow, he would gladly go. We hope that does not happen but, if it does, we will continue to support him 100 percent."

Donnie Smith, vice president of Human Resources/Public Relations for Rush Health Systems, said Barry Pettit is a "true American."

"He is everything you are looking for in a young man," Smith said. "He works hard when he is here and he takes his military service very serious, and we take it serious with him. He is an exemplary citizen."

Last thoughts

We live in a time when a great deal is required of our military service people, and they are rising to the occasion.

Some, like Barry, are now returning home to resume the lives that were interrupted when they answered the call to serve. Others continue to fight the good fight.



RUSH FOUNDATION HOSPITAL

Barry Pettit, a registered nurse in the emergency room at Rush Foundation Hospital, prepares to administer an injection. Pettit is also a major in the Mississippi Air National Guard and has served as the leader of a five-man flight team which transported wounded soldiers home.

PHOTO BY PAULA MERRITT
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